

TARA'S BIG TRAVELS



PACIFIC RIM WIN

OUR INTREPID TRAVEL QUEEN FOLLOWS OPTIMUS PRIME AND COMPANY TO HONG KONG.

BY TARA HITCHCOCK

I T WAS FITTING THAT I HAD ONLY SEEN Hong Kong in movies, most recently an old Jackie Chan flick. A surreal mixture of futuristic high-rises and traditional clustered-together apartment buildings, Hong Kong is the stuff of fantasy. It was an “East meets West” gateway I never expected to touch or smell in person, only enjoy on the big screen. But an Autobot named Optimus Prime changed that. After director Michael Bay took his *Transformers 4* cast and crew to Hong Kong for 10 days of shooting last fall, he made a decision to host the movie’s world premiere in the fabled city. An invite from Paramount and a 14-plus hour flight on Cathay Pacific out of LAX later, I touched down in the Asian hub ready to make the most of my three Hong Kong days.

I'M ON A BOAT!

The city itself may seem chaotic, but the public transportation system is anything but. From the time my flight pulled up to the gate, I was at my Kowloon hotel in 45 minutes, and half of that was on the airport tram.

Jetlagged and unsure what day it was – this whole international date line thing plays David

Blaine-like mind tricks on you – I dumped my bags and headed to the Star Ferry to catch my first glimpse of Hong Kong at night, just in time for the show. Each night around 8:15, the city seems to ingest an energy shot, and Hong Kong’s skyscrapers engage in a futuristic light show, communicating with each other across Victoria Harbor – which connects the city’s mainland and island halves – in laser-light Morse code. On the ferry, you’re caught right in the middle of the conversation. Sure, you can cross the harbor on the subway or by car through a tunnel, but the most traditional, inexpensive route is still by boat. The ferry’s origins date back to 1880, when a cook started a ferry service with his steamboat *The Morning Star*. Today, the pier’s charming clock tower in Tsim Sha Tsui stands guard as a fleet of twelve ferries shuttle over 70,000 passengers a day.

The good news about being jet-lagged in Hong Kong, it’s 15 hours ahead of Arizona, is almost all of your friends and family are in the middle of their work day, so there’s no shortage of people to Facebook, instant message and share your ferry light-show pictures.



Mark Wahlberg at the Hong Kong premiere of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*

“DIM SUM FOR DUMMIES”

I’m not great with math, but I think I got about three hours of sleep before waking up the next morning...or night...or... who knows. It was so early, even the tram to the top of Victoria Peak – the highest point on the island – was still slumbering. But Bill, a cab driver at the end of his shift waiting outside the W Hotel, was not. I talked him into taking me to top of the peak. I learned that Bill, 64, was born and raised in Hong Kong and had three grown children. As he meandered up the road overlooking his city, he told me in broken English why he loves it here. “For me, it’s easy. Here, it’s simple. I do everything I want here and I’ve been here a long, long time.” Bill waited for me as I raced to catch the sunrise. Besides a group of foul-mouthed yet fun Canadian tourists smoking cigarettes at the wee hour of 5 a.m., I was the only one near the top that

morning. My guess is they got even less sleep than I did the night before.

After taking me to the peak, Bill dropped me off at the mid-level escalators so I could take them down to Stanley Street in the Central Hong Kong district. I realized I hadn't eaten since my Cathay morning muffin hours earlier. In Hong Kong, it's all about the dim sum, which isn't just a tradition – it's their “breakfast of champions,” and the Luk Yu Teahouse is the training facility. Getting its name from Lu Yu, a Tang Dynasty scribe who waxed poetic about Chinese tea, the teahouse is a mixture of Cantonese, Art Deco and bamboo dim sum containers strapped around the shoulders of polite hostesses. After being escorted upstairs a few minutes before opening, I was handed a piece of paper that looked like a bingo card. I found out later it's what they use to keep track of what you ordered and tally your dim sum intake at the end.

If English is their second language, the Luk Yu folks didn't let on. My waiter plopped down a tea setting, heated my beautiful porcelain tea cup in a bowl of warm water and handed me a towel to clean up. I thought about letting him know I'm germ-free, having taken my typhoid pills and getting a Hepatitis A shot in the states. He then called out the ladies who strolled around the place in hopes of me picking their assigned dim sum dish. Unfortunately for me, the best “salesman” was the gal with the date-spread-filled pastry. I swore she said “chicken,” but I was wrong. One bite later, I moved on, wishing she hadn't drawn a line on my bingo card where “gullible American” must have been written in Cantonese. Who would have thought that at 7 a.m., I'd be feasting on steamed spare ribs and preserved fish meat with shrimp shumai?

A BUDDHA IN THERE SOMEWHERE

Perhaps Hong Kong's best-kept secrets are its more than 200 surrounding islands, the largest being Lantau. Years ago, three monks built a house to worship Buddha there. Today, thousands of tourists take the 24-minute Ngong Ping cable car ride to see it in person. The Tian Tan Buddha, an enormous bronze statue, rests on a hill next to a monastery. Unfortunately, it also rests near a cheesy, over-the-top village where you can watch the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the first Buddha (actually, not too bad), stage your own photo in front of a green screen, pray to the “wishing Bodhi tree” and grab a Starbucks or a Subway sandwich on your way out.

It all seemed out of place and almost offensive next to a place of quiet reflection for spiritual seekers. I have a feeling this was not part of the “path to enlightenment” Gautama envisioned, especially for a man who preached simplicity and self-discipline. But then again, he probably never needed a coffee fix before heading up 268 steps to his statue. Weather was not on my side that morning, as the Buddha was covered in fog. I tried to wait it out, but had no luck. Maybe I should have paid the few Hong Kong dollars for a “no-rain and fog wish” at the tree. Karma! At least there was a gift shop in the village where I could buy a cheap umbrella, right next to the Buddha keychains.

INFIDELITY AND MY SILK DRESS

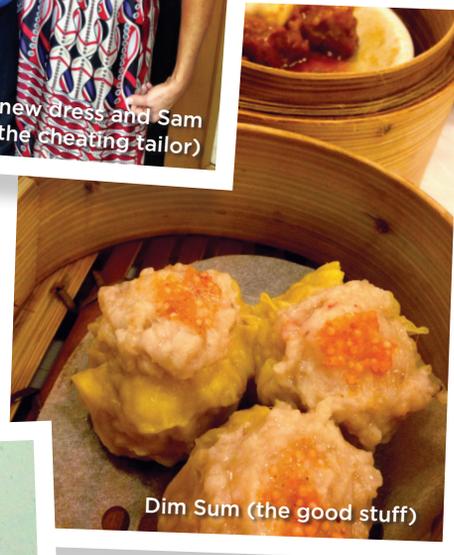
One of the world's most famous tailors spends

his days in a cramped shop off Hong Kong's 5th Avenue, Nathan Road. Besides all of the silk fabric lining the walls of the place, Sam's Tailor is like Sardi's, packed with pictures of famous visitors and clients. Everyone from Bill Clinton to Michael Jackson has been through Sam's, all leaving 24 to 48 hours later with a brand new suit. I decided to bring my favorite \$45 sundress and see if Sam's tailors could recreate it a few times over with some Hong Kong flair. Sam is not big on smiling. He's Indian, stern, polite and all business. His son Roshan makes up for it, though, offering me a beer on arrival and regaling me with great stories including one about a recently exposed infidelity. As I was being pinned and sized by a tailor who looked like he just ate the date-pastry I had hours earlier, I found out his misery stemmed from the fact that his mainland China wife and Hong Kong wife and mistresses all just found out about each



WORKING THE WORLD PREMIERE

The night of the *Transformers 4* premiere, the heat was palpable. With temps at 98 degrees and 100 percent humidity, Paramount reps



handed all the journalists battery-powered mini-fans. I think my friend Nancy Jay was more effective just blowing on my face. If you watch any of Michael Bay's films, he's a master when it comes to lighting his actors, all of them consistently tanned and glowing whether or not they're being chased by a 100-ton Decepticon. We had nothing close to Bay-like lighting that night. A friend once described this kind of humidity as similar to laying roof tar while hanging out in your dishwasher mid-cycle with the door closed. But the humidity did little to quash the excitement of the premiere. Fans turned out in droves to watch Mark Wahlberg, Kelsey Grammer and gorgeous newcomer Nicola Peltz walk the carpet. After a 10-minute mini-monsoon, with a wet T-shirt contest after my red-carpet interviews, I asked Bay about spending a few days filming in Monument Valley, where the Autobots plot their course of action. “I shot my student film there” he said. Bay told me he loves Arizona

and encouraged me to visit his website and blog to see the pictures from the shoot. I encouraged him to do the same, as I told him I was working on an article for *PHOENIX* magazine that would include a slide show from the premiere. I promised him I'd tweak any photos and make sure everyone had good lighting. ■

Watch *Tara's Reel Travels* Thursday mornings on CBS 5 KPHO or visit taraontv.com.